childhood & philosophy

book review

Teaching Democracy in an Age of Uncertainty: Place-Responsive Learning, by Gilbert Burgh and Simone Thornton. Routledge, 2022.

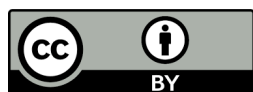**author**

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Most of the time when people discuss the topics of democracy and education, their society and the world are facing significant challenges. Over 100 years ago, when John Dewey wrote his groundbreaking book *Democracy and Education*, the world was in the midst of World War I. Simultaneously American society confronted violations of academic freedom, freedom of speech and serious infringements of civil rights. In 2022, when Gilbert Burgh and Simone Thornton published *Teaching Democracy in an Age of Uncertainty: Place-Responsive Learning* (Routledge), the world witnessed various forms of sociopolitical turmoil (referred to as

"*uncertainty*" in their book), including the Covid-19 pandemic, domestic and transnational conflicts, the spread of conspiracy theories and racial discrimination, the looming climate crisis, and the inaction of political elites.

Since the time of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (or even earlier), the world has been marked by uncertainty, and at each moment in history people have emphasized the significance of democracy and education. In this context, Burgh and Thornton's book addresses a somewhat classic topic. However, this should not be interpreted as suggesting that their book is outdated. On the contrary, the authors assert a firm belief that unless we become more self-reflective and self-critical about the implicit assumptions underlying traditional democratic education—by asking "Which democracy?" "Which teaching method?" and "Which epistemology?"—our understanding of democracy and education will merely conform to and perpetuate existing chaos and uncertainty, failing to contribute to the transformation of our world for the better. By positioning Dewey and Dewey-inspired philosophers at its core, the book offers a theoretical reconstruction of the relationship between democracy and education, ultimately presenting a more sophisticated model of democratic education for the contemporary world. This represents the novel contribution of their book.

The book consists of six chapters, each of which invites readers to reconsider the relationship between democracy and education from a different angle. In what follows, I will overview the argument in each chapter, beginning with Chapter 3. While I know that this approach may be unconventional for a book review, I believe that the central argument of Chapter 3—the distinction between *education for democracy* and *democratic education*—represents a key theme that the authors have long explored (e.g. Burgh 2003), and in my view, permeates the argument of the entire book.

According to Burgh and Thornton, the primary aim of education for democracy is to *prepare* learners (particularly children) for future civic life by equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to enhance their participatory capacity. To achieve this, emphasis is placed on teaching core politics and transferring essential civic knowledge. Learners are also expected, when necessary, to critically evaluate the legitimacy of their political systems and

institutions. Typical strategies include moral dilemma education, role-modelling, critical thinking training, and deliberation on controversial political topics. However, Burgh and Thornton offer a critical examination of education for democracy. One of their criticisms is that it tends to overlook the present contexts in which learners live. Put differently, education for democracy runs the risk of consuming learners' *present* knowledge, skills and ways of thinking under the guise of "preparation for future." Furthermore, in education for democracy, adults typically determine what should be taught, leaving learners without agency in the design and definition of their own learning. As a result, learners are expected to conform to decisions made by adults, without any opportunity to challenge or participate in the decision-making process. More broadly, such an approach to education to socialization and the reproduction of existing systems, but fails to foster the reconstruction of society.

By contrast, the democratic education proposed by Burgh and Thornton (2022) is a more collaborative ideal, with the goal of enabling learners to recognize "the social role of schooling as that of reconstruction, and that children and adolescents have an integral role to play in shaping democracy" (p. 71). In this context, "reconstruction" refers to Burgh and Thornton's use of Dewey's theory of education as an ongoing process of reorganization and reconstruction of experience. They argue that the democratic role of education is not to reproduce existing structures, but to challenge, examine, question, and analyze one's own experiences and update them. Learners are thus engaged in this self-corrective process of reconstructing experience in response to changing circumstances, through continuous deliberation. This process enables them to make decisions and take actions regarding matters of common concern in their classrooms, schools and communities. In this model, adults (teachers) do not serve as knowledge-givers but as facilitators who help learners (re)define and (re)shape their experiences. Burgh and Thornton assert that democracy and education should not be viewed through a dualistic lens (such as, present vs. future, adult vs. children), but through a monistic (present-future, adult-children) lens.

A clear understanding of the distinction between education for democracy and democratic education allows for a more effective reading of the other

chapters. Chapter 1 explores different conceptions of democracy that underpin democratic education. These varying conceptions of democracy may prioritize different forms of democratic education. In light of Burgh and Thornton's perspective on democratic education, we do not opt for either liberal or communitarian conceptions of democracy, as both are grounded in a dualistic understanding of the state (or community) and citizens (or individuals). Instead, we advocate for the deliberative conception of democracy (or what Burgh and Thornton call *radical democratic citizenship*), in which democracy and citizenship are constantly transformed and reconstructed through the deliberative processes of citizens. Chapter 2 then examines three dimensions of teaching—transmission, transaction, and transformation. As discussed above, democratic education is more than preparation for the future through the acquisition of existing knowledge. This, however, does not imply that transmission is unnecessary. Rather, transmission becomes meaningful in democratic education only when it contributes to learners' transactional and transformational learning process.

In Chapter 4, Burgh and Thornton (2022) justify their claim that a key concept for realizing democratic education (rather than education for democracy) is educational philosophy. Unlike philosophy of education, which reflects on the nature, aims and problems of education, educational philosophy focuses on the practical role that philosophy plays in education. Reorganizing children's experiences and deepening their civic learning necessitate a more communicative, interactive, and reflective (in essence, deliberative) practice. Burgh and Thornton find a model for such education in Matthew Lipman's concept of "turning a classroom into a community of (philosophical) inquiry." They argue that the idea of community of inquiry is important not only because it serves as an educational method for teaching learners to think for themselves (the so-called a narrow sense of community of inquiry), but also because it functions as a guiding educational principle that defines what education ought to be (the so-called a wide sense of community of inquiry). The narrow and wide senses of the community of inquiry should not be understood in a dualistic manner, such as "theory vs. practice" or "concrete vs. abstract," although Lipman himself falls into such a pitfall. Burgh and Thornton contend that, to make more meaningful use of the community of

inquiry, it is necessary to move beyond this dualistic approach and employ the community of inquiry as a social reconstructive learning process, in which learners reconstruct their own lives through collaborative philosophical examination of their experiences. This is an interdisciplinary experience that moves between practical and philosophical thinking, where learners reflectively share and (re)construct their own experiences and thus cultivating the capacity for democratic citizenship. Only when *both* the narrow and wide senses of the community of inquiry interact with each other can the true value of democratic education be realized.

What kind of epistemology should we possess to realize such education? This is the question explored in Chapter 5. Drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's epistemology and fallibilism, Burgh and Thornton argue for the significance of genuine doubt as a key epistemic attitude. Democratic education involves more than simply receiving existing political knowledge uncritically or giving excessive credibility to a single source of information. A successful community of inquiry, according to Burgh and Thornton (2022), must be "open to self-correction (or more precisely, democratic self-correction), which entails the cultivation of doubt as a precondition for genuine inquiry, so that the students follow the argument where it leads rather than to a predetermined conclusion for which the epistemic grounds have not been questioned" (p. 127).

Building on the arguments outlined above, Chapter 6 theorizes the idea of place-responsive education—a subtitle of the book. Place-based education shifts our focus away from a form of "classroomism" (Nishiyama, 2025) in democratic education, which treats the classroom as an only space for preparing for future democracy, towards a form of learning that allows learners to engage in classroom, school and communities while simultaneously reconstructing the meaning of the place and their own experiences. As indigenous epistemologies clearly demonstrate, place is not a neutral concept, but an interactive one. When we work with a specific place, that place also informs us in return. Through dialogic interactions within different places, we examine our experiences from various perspectives and make meaning. Finding a place, engaging in dialogue, and reconstructing the meaning of the place and oneself are democratic processes in

themselves. This is how learners can continue to navigate today's changing (or uncertain) society, where even adults, educators and academics do not have definitive answers to how to live.

Throughout the book, Burgh and Thornton's (2022) argument can be understood as a contemporary revival of Dewey's theory of democratic education. Its core claim can be summarized as "education as an ongoing reorganization and reconstruction of experience that increases students' ability to direct and control their lives, rather than acting as preparation for something else" (p. 169). This message is straightforward and persuasive, offering significant implications for reorganization of democratic education in a contemporary, divided, and uncertain society. However, there are several aspects that remain fully unexamined. In what follows I will spotlight one of these aspects—Chapter 5's argument regarding the power and ethics of knowing.

Let's return to Chapter 5. As already outlined, the chapter discusses the role of genuine doubt in democratic education. In the second half of the chapter, Burgh and Thornton address an epistemic challenge to genuine doubt by examining the risk of epistemic injustice. Our epistemic exchanges are sometimes influenced by preexisting prejudices toward individuals with specific identities. As a result, some individuals may be excluded from the process of genuine community of inquiry, as their credibility as knowers is significantly undermined *prior to* engaging in democratic education. In this context, genuine doubt becomes nearly impossible, as it is difficult for individuals to critically recognize one's own prejudice. To consider this, I will share an example from my own observation of democratic education in an Australian primary school.

> A white native English-speaking student (Student A) displayed his leadership during classroom deliberation. However, he often asked questions when other students shared their opinions. Sometimes, he deliberatively provided counterexamples to stimulate further deliberative interactions. In this sense, he served as a shadow facilitator. However, when an Asian non-native English-speaking student (Student B) spoke, the white native English-speaking student neither responded nor made further attempt to deepen the conversation. (Nishiyama, 2025, p. 143)

Why did Student A not respond to *any* testimonial contributions from Student B? One possible interpretation is that Student A held a negative prejudice against Asian students like Student B (i.e., assuming that Asian non-native English

speakers may not speak English well and therefore would not be able to answer his questions or challenges). As a result, Student A significantly reduced the credibility of Student B's capacity as a knower. In other words, Student A did not recognize Student B as a partner of the community of inquiry from the outset. Student B was treated not as a member of the epistemic community, but as a mere informant who could provide knowledge but could not engage in meaningful exchange. This reflects what Christopher Hookway (2010) refers to as "participatory injustice," a form of epistemic injustice, which often occurs in pedagogical settings where teachers and students from the dominant culture hold power (Murris, 2013).

To address epistemic injustice, Burgh and Thornton (2022) contend that "teachers need to cultivate traitorous identities, someone who resists the epistemic assumptions and institutional practices of the culture to which they belong as a classroom intervention to listen to the voices of those who are outside the dominant narrative and are having difficulty being heard or understood" (p. 128). In my view, this suggestion appears a bit optimistic. As Miranda Fricker (2007) rightly notes, epistemic injustice is one of the most abstract forms of injustice, taking "the most *surreptitious* and psychologically *subtle* forms [emphasis added]" (p. 38). Epistemic injustice differs from more intentional and explicit forms of injustice, such as hate speech, which is why *both* those who commit epistemic injustice and those who suffer from it rarely recognize the fact of negative prejudice or its harm. In democratic education, if we ask learners to reflect on the dominant narratives within which they are embedded, how can they resist their prejudicial assumptions of which they are unaware?

One possible solution is for the teacher, as a facilitator, to explain the problematic epistemic assumptions that learners may potentially hold. Unfortunately, though, this approach may not work effectively. Many reports have shown that when people from dominant cultures are informed about the potential prejudice, they often respond with excessive defensiveness or outright opposition. Robin DiAngelo (2018) refers to this as "white fragility"—a phenomenon where white individuals become overly defensive or express anger when confronted with the suggestion of white privilege during discussions of racism. Epistemic

injustice is difficult to address precisely because, whether intentional or not, many people refuse to acknowledge it. As Kamily Posey (2021, p. 15) aptly notes, "dominant hearers are likely to find themselves in situations where they cannot express testimonial virtue because they have been primed for too long to see the world as one of "US" and "Them", and negative stereotypes are too cognitively sticky, and testimonial injustice too pervasive, for the consistent application of virtue over time." If, as Burgh and Thornton hope, people were virtuous enough to sincerely engage in self-criticism, epistemic injustice would not exist in the first place.

It is inevitable that we must address both explicit and abstract forms of discrimination and negative prejudice if we wish to practice democratic education in a contemporary, divided society. However, children raised in a dominant culture may resist open dialogue regarding their potential—and unconscious—commitment to epistemic injustice. Worse still, they may become furious or excessively defensive when critically discussing their privilege. We live in such a society. And this presents another dimension of uncertainty that we face: the strong anxiety surrounding the consequences of critically examining who we are. If we are uncritical of this issue, "turning classroom into community of inquiry" can easily devolve into "turning classroom into adversarial community." I believe this represents an implicit, and yet significant, implication of this book—presenting an issue that we, as advocates of democratic education, must continue to engage with.

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How to quote this article:

credits

- **Acknowledgements:** Not applicable.
- **Financing:** Not applicable.
- **Conflicts of interest:** The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.
- **Ethical approval:** Not applicable.
- **Availability of data and material:**
- **Authors' contribution:** Conceptualisation; Writing, revising and editing the text; Formal analysis; Obtaining funding; Research; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Supervision; Validation: NISHIYAMA, K.
- **Image:** Not applicable.
- **Preprint:** Not published in preprint repository.

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submitted: 05.03.2025   *approved*: 05.03.2025   *published*: 14.03.2025

editor: walter omar kohan